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Admissions policies and ethical concerns regarding intercollegiate athletics

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine admissions practices and processes at Division I colleges and universities, especially as they relate to special considerations and related ethical issues. First, I will review the history of abuses in athletic recruiting and attempts at reform. Second, I will provide more recent examples of abuses and reform attempts. Finally, I will provide data from an interview I conducted at a relatively large Midwestern Division I-A public university.

Admissions Policies and Ethical Concerns Regarding Intercollegiate Athletics

A Research paper

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by

W. Andrew Hlubek

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has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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Admissions Policies and Ethical Concerns Regarding Intercollegiate Athletics

Is it ethical to grant admission to college to a prospective athlete who is unable to read or write? Athletes sometimes are granted admission to and receive degrees from institutions of higher education without the ability to read their acceptance letter or diploma. Football players like Dexter Manley, a graduate of Oklahoma State University who went on to play professional football, declared several years after graduation that he was unable to read well. In Manley's case, the administration of Oklahoma State apparently was unconcerned with the matter: "There would be those who would argue that Dexter Manley got exactly what he wanted out of OSU. He was able to develop his athletic skills and ability, he was noticed by the pros, he got a pro contract. So maybe we did him a favor by letting him go through the program," said John Campbell, president of OSU at the time (cited in Barbash, 1990, p. 40).

College administrators are faced with the challenge to balance academics and athletics. In some cases, the pressure leads to scandals and illegal recruiting of athletes by universities and colleges. One reason for this is the potential money sports generate if teams win.

Administrators are challenged to distinguish between what is acceptable "special consideration" and clear violations in terms of admitting prospective student-athletes. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has established guidelines school officials must follow in determining eligibility of prospective student-athletes, and colleges and universities have established their own admissions policies. However, in some cases, institutions have adhered to the NCAA guidelines, but have violated their own admissions policies in granting eligibility to prospective student-athletes. For instance, at the University of Minnesota, a student failed to meet

the university's admission criteria, but was granted permission to play basketball at the university (Thelin, 1994).

Today, violations of admissions and recruitment policies continue much like they have since intercollegiate sports began in the late 19th century in the United States (Rudolph, 1990). Over the years, several reforms have been proposed to control illegal and unethical practices in intercollegiate sports but have fallen well short of their intended objectives (Thelin, 1994).

The purpose of this paper is to examine admissions practices and processes at Division I colleges and universities, especially as they relate to special considerations and related ethical issues. First, I will review the history of abuses in athletic recruiting and attempts at reform. Second, I will provide more recent examples of abuses and reform attempts. Finally, I will provide data from an interview I conducted at a relatively large Midwestern Division I-A public university.

Historical Background

Colleges first established standards of admission in 1642 with Harvard (Shaw, 1991). At the time, some colleges were simply looking for bodies who could financially support the institution (Rudolph, 1990). There was great competition in recruiting students, much like the pressure today to recruit "blue chip" athletes in order to have a successful intercollegiate athletics program.

Student services were provided, to a degree, by the president, part-time librarian, and a treasurer of the college or university. Faculty, however, were mainly responsible for most student affairs functions. College and universities did not have admissions counselors and college examinations until the turn of the 20th century when colleges employed the first directors of admission (Rudolph, 1990).

In most cases at colleges and universities, a faculty member or the president of the college would establish admissions criteria and administer examination. (Linn, 1993).

Toward the end of the 19th century people began to take notice and voice opinions about abuses in athletic recruitment and admissions of athletes. As early as the 1880s, a professor complained that athletes were being paid to attend college, and Harvard students claimed that Princeton athletes were being paid to play (Smith, 1993).

The Carnegie Foundation was the first major organization to initiate sports reform. Howard Savage's Carnegie Foundation report, *American College Athletics*, was released in 1929. Prior to the Carnegie Foundation report, most athletic reforms were related to the prevention of injuries. Savage conducted a three-year study analyzing facts about college athletics on campuses in the U.S. and Canada. One of the goals of Savage's report was to reduce commercialism in college athletics. He also wanted to make the general public and college administrators aware of problems facing college athletics. Some of the facts reported consisted of abuses in recruitment of athletes. One of the abuses noted in the Savage report was that athletes were being paid to play, among them University of Michigan players who were subsidized by their coach (Thelin, 1996).

Significant reform proposals since 1929 include the 1952 Presidents' Report for the American Council on Education and the 1991 Knight Foundation Commission study (Sperber, 1993). The 1952 Presidents' Report was an attempt to control the commercialism of sports. A committee of 10 members was appointed by Dr. Arthur Adams, president of ACE, to make recommendations including the idea that coaches be considered faculty and university presidents take full responsibility for athletics

programs. The Presidents' Report came as a result of transcript alterations for admission at institutions like William and Mary and several gambling incidents including point shaving by basketball players at institutions like Long Island University, Brooklyn College, and the University of Kentucky. Some of the reform suggestions included limiting bowl games, spring practices, and recruiting. Since many presidents of universities were opposed to the reform, it never gained the momentum needed to gain full acceptance. One reason some of the presidents were opposed to the reform was because the ACE was too closely linked to the NCAA and not independent in evaluating commercialism in intercollegiate athletics.

The 1991 Knight Foundation Commission report was an attempt to reduce commercialism and consider ethics in intercollegiate sports. One of the reforms was to restore academic integrity at institutions. This involved making college and university presidents more aware of some of the recruitment and admissions policies at their institutions. One reason for this reform was because a disproportionate amount of "special admits" and low graduation rates of athletes were found. The One-Plus-Three plan made university presidents responsible for the academic integrity, financial integrity, and independent certification of intercollegiate sports programs (Thelin, 1996).

Current Abuses and Reform

Today, abuses in athletic recruitment are much the same as abuses when intercollegiate athletics began. Ronald Smith quoted University of Iowa president Virgil Hancher in the early 1900s: "Financial need...was not the basis for most awards and scholarships in American higher education. Talent was the general criterion, and not necessarily intellectual talent" (cited in Smith, 1993, p. 438). Athletic talent

sometimes has become more important than intellectual talent in the recruitment and admissions process.

Some authors suggest that athletic recruitment has gone too far. "Over the years, revelations of phony test scores, doctored transcripts, illiterate 'student athletes,' no-show summer jobs, no-interest or even no-payback 'loans,' hundred-dollar handshakes, and free automobiles have repeatedly tarred big-time college sports with the brush of scandal," states Lee Sigelman (1995, p. 247).

Some of the abuses in the past decade include: improper payments to football players at Oklahoma State, cash given to men's basketball players by coaches at Northwestern State University in Louisiana, and cash being sent to prospective University of Kentucky basketball players (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1991).

The University of Southern California was put on probation and not allowed to participate in the 1981 Rose Bowl because the athletic department violated USC admissions standards (Thelin, 1996). The University of Oklahoma received sanctions and Southern Methodist University the "death penalty" for recruitment violations during the 1980s. Athletes at the University of Cincinnati were allowed to play basketball despite poor academic credentials (Davis & Foldes, 1996).

Most of the abuses come as a result of the pressure to win and the potential revenue that intercollegiate sports and athletes might generate for an institution. Some of the abuses of recruitment and admissions practices have come as a result of the athletic department or coaching staff bypassing stated admissions practices.

Coaches of intercollegiate athletics sometimes put pressure on admissions officers to admit prospective student-athletes who do not meet requirements. This can make an admissions officer's job difficult. Admissions officers are sometimes

challenged with the decision to admit student athletes who do not quite meet NCAA entrance requirements or their own institutions (Linn, 1993).

Many of the abuses by admissions officers are related to special consideration. Special consideration means giving an exception for an athlete (or any other student) who has not fully met admissions requirements. The problem with special consideration is that admissions officers or athletic departments grant athletes admission without ethically considering their chance for academic success.

Today, some athletes are allowed to play at institutions with little regard toward their academic preparation or success. Paul “Bear” Bryant, former University of Alabama football coach, suggested that college football players were athletes first and students second (Thelin, 1996).

“Some schools are notorious for their willingness to accept virtually any promising athlete in a revenue-generating sport, including some who lack basic literacy skills” (Sigelman, 1995, p. 257). According to a *Chronicle of Higher Education* survey, all but 9 of 73 Division I-A schools that make “special exceptions” in admissions do so for a higher proportion of varsity athletes than of other students (Sigelman, 1995).

The concern of unethical special consideration and athletes’ academic success versus their athletics success doesn’t appear to be as strong as the temptation to abuse such policies. Many institutions still appear to be more concerned with winning rather than academic success. Butler suggests that the competition between schools is the only reason why there is concern over test scores of athletes at other schools. The issue isn’t so much a concern about academics as it is about athletics (Butler, 1995).

The awareness of abuses in athletic recruitment and admissions appears to have grown in recent decades. The government has taken more of an interest and role in intercollegiate athletics through legislation proposed by the U.S. Congress. Congress is believed to have two separate roles in athletic reform, an investigative role and a legislative role. Recent reform legislation enacted includes the Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act, signed in 1994, and the Student Right to Know Act, passed in 1990. The Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act requires all higher education institutions which participate in the student aid program and maintain an athletic program to report the benefits and opportunities for both men and women student athletes. The Student Right-To-Know Act requires all colleges and universities that provide scholarships or financial assistance to report graduation rates to all prospective athletes and the Department of Education (Katz, 1995).

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) is responsible for control, reform, and standards of entrance requirements and recruitment at Division I institutions. The NCAA was established to control scandal in athletics and to create a more level “playing field” for all competing institutions. All athletes must first meet the standards established by the NCAA Clearinghouse and then it is up to the institution to decide if a prospective student athlete is eligible to play.

The current NCAA standards for athletic eligibility, also known as Proposition 16, are as follows: graduate from high school and complete at least 13 core classes including four years of English, two years of math, one year of algebra and geometry, two years of social science, and two years of natural or physical science. They also must have one additional class in English, math or natural or physical science, and two classes from the previously mentioned categories. The athlete also must have at

least a 2.5 grade-point average and a sum score of 68 on the ACT or 820 on the SAT. A sliding scale is used if the student's grade-point average is under a 2.5 but higher than a 2.0.

The NCAA has revised its standards several times the past decade, first with Proposition 48 and then with Proposition 16. Proposition 48 required student athletes to achieve a 2.0 GPA and complete 11 core courses. Proposition 16, enacted by the NCAA in 1996, has higher standards than Proposition 48. Proposition 16 requires prospective student athletes to achieve a 2.5 GPA and complete 11 core courses. In both cases, the student must have a composite score above a 700 on the SAT or a 17 on the ACT (Witham, 1995).

Interview

I conducted an interview with an admissions official at a large Midwestern university to discuss some of the ethical issues in athletic admissions. The university I selected has a student population just exceeding 13,000. I had three goals in the interview. First, I wanted to determine if the university makes exceptions or gives special consideration for athletes. Second, I wanted to determine what, if any, criteria were used to make special consideration for athletes and what is considered unethical. Finally, I wanted to compare the university's admissions standards and policies regarding athlete recruitment to other institutions.

I conducted a formal interview and initiated several informal discussions with an associate director of admissions of the university. This official is responsible for athletic admissions. Part of his duties consist of making sure that prospective athletes not only meet the university's admissions standards, but also meet the entrance requirements established by the NCAA.

This official stated that the university grants special consideration to athletes who do not meet prescribed admissions standards. Even though special consideration may be granted, the decision rests with the admissions office. Students who are considered for exception must rank in the 40-49th percentile of their high school class, have an ACT of 23 or better, and have exceeded the minimum high school core course requirements. These decisions are made on an individual basis by a specially designated admissions representative.

For the most part, the admissions counselor's decision to grant special consideration rests on a student having a reasonable chance for academic success. "Something on that student's record must support a decision to admit," the official states. "Also, there should not be undue pressure by coaches or others in the athletic department" (personal communication, January 29, 1998)

He also emphasizes the importance of student services when exceptions are made. "If exceptions are made, universities need to have support services available to help athletes succeed academically. We are cautious about the number of lower half exceptions because we must ask ourselves if we have the support systems in place to support these students," he stated (personal communication, January 29, 1998).

The university's standards for admissions are strict and ethical, the official asserted. "We are ethical and we are different. Some universities admit any student athlete who clears the NCAA Clearinghouse," he continued.

The standards for admission at this university are higher than the standards established by the NCAA. At this university, students are eligible for regular admission if they rank in the upper 50 percent of their class and complete core courses including four years of English, three years of mathematics and social sciences, and electives.

Prospective students must also take the ACT or SAT examinations.

The university is a member of the Missouri Valley Conference (MVC) in basketball and the Gateway Conference for football. According to the athletic admissions official, the university has the strictest admissions requirement in the MVC and Gateway.

Conclusions

Gurney and Stuart suggest that student affairs practitioners play an important role in the academic success of specially admitted student-athletes. They also suggest that academic success of specially admitted student-athletes might give justification for special admission policies (Gurney & Stuart, 1987).

Institutions should be as concerned with the ethics of making exceptions to prospective student-athletes as they are about whether or not the athlete remains in school. However, in some cases like the University of Cincinnati, it doesn't appear like there is a genuine concern about athletes' long-term well-being. The problem with this is the high costs of remedial work when too many exceptions are made. Russell Curtis, Jr., suggests that intercollegiate sports is going through hard times. Athletes are coming to school poorly prepared much like the Irish, Jewish, Italian, and Polish athletes between the period 1930 to 1950. The costs of remedial education are higher than the profits these sports are generating (Curtis, 1995).

I believe admissions officers need to admit only those athletes who meet both the NCAA and institutional entrance standards. Research has shown that well-prepared athletes are just as successful in school as non-athletes. Some research even suggests that part of the reason athletes leave school is not so much a case of academics. DeBrock, Hendricks, and Koenker (1996) suggest that imposing

graduation rates on student athletes is not worthwhile because some athletes leave school for money or other non-academic reasons.

There is no objective or subjective test that admissions officers can use with absolute accuracy to determine the potential success of prospective athletes. “No test can measure educational development with absolute precision” (Linn, 1993). I believe admissions officers need to do their best to adhere to some code of ethics in determining eligibility of prospective student-athletes, like the National Association of College Admissions Counselors competencies and code of ethics for admissions counselors (NACAC, 1991). Admissions counselors need to understand their school’s missions, philosophies, and objectives to make decisions on eligibility.

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Black students often feel misled about the college life on campus by admissions officers. They pay more attention to admissions information than whites (Hudson, Fall 1992 and Winter 1993).

50 percent of minority students require remedial learning. "Less than one third of minority students enroll in proper college preparatory courses, such as algebra and geometry. The right courses help lead to high SAT scores."

Gurney and Stuart did a study of the academic performance of special Reform movements have been structured in the past, only to collapse to abuses in athletic recruitment and admissions.

admission athletes, athletes admitted under normal guidelines at a institution, and non-athlete students. Student athletes granted special admissions persisted at higher rates than other students in the study. Student athletes granted special admission remained in better academic standing than non-athletes despite not having as high of grade-point average.

The fact that Congress is dominated by Republicans, who desire less government influence, has quieted down government legislation on intercollegiate sports (Katz, 1995).